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## ABSTRACT

A nationwide survey was conducted among families with children enrolled in Kinder-Care Learning Centers (KCLC) to determine parental practices of reading aloud to preschool children. A total of 50 KCLCs was selected in such a way that the geographic distribution by four U.S. regions was representative of the 900 KCLC-Randomly selected centers were located in 25 states, with the number of centers per state ranging from 1 to 5. Working parents with 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in these centers comprised the sample population. Survey forms designed to collect demographic data and information about read-aloud practices were distributed to the sample population. Questions focused on demographic data, frequency and length of read-aloud sessions, sources of books, the person who usually read to the child, verbal interaction during read-aloud sessions, favorite books, read-aloud time and read-aloud place, and whether or not the child was familiar with selected well-known characters from children's literature. Findings indicate that although the working parents had limited time to spend with their children, 83.4 percent reported that they read aloud several times a week or more, and 89 percent spent at least 15 minutes per read-aloud session. Findings also provide information about the variety and quality of literature being shared with children. (RH)

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Read-aloud practices among working parents of children in child-care centers  
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### Who's Reading to the Children?

Read-aloud practices among working parents of children in child-care centers - a national study, November 16, 1985, National Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Children throughout the world settle on laps or snuggle in beds anticipating the pleasure of storytime. They listen eagerly as adults transform the printed page into scenes of enchantment. These children start their formal education nourished by years of happy experiences with books, and for them the task of learning to read is clearly worth the effort.

Other youngsters, however, have not experienced this pleasant initiation into literacy and begin school without any understanding of or appreciation for the values of reading. In a technological world, television often dominates family time. Some three and four year old children are watching television an average of four hours a day (Singer 1983). Children may actually spend less time in school during the first eighteen years of life than they invest in television viewing (Carnegie Quarterly 1977). "Hundreds of thousands of these children of television have never seen a good children's book, have never been read to, and have never had the example of adults reading in their homes" (Larrick 1975, p. 77). If first graders have not already found joy in books, they are unlikely to see any reason for learning to read since, for them, this skill has very little application or relevance.

Authorities in reading and children's literature stress the importance of a rich heritage of literature (Butler 1983; Cullinan 1983; Harkness 1981; Huck 1979; Koeller 1981; McKay 1981; Morrow 1983). The experience of listening to books not only develops positive attitudes toward reading but also has beneficial effects on children's cognitive and academic growth (Burket 1981; McCormick 1977, 1983; Teale 1978, 1981).

Researchers have consistently found a positive correlation between being read to, both at home and in school, and reading achievement and/or reading readiness (Burgess 1982; Briggs and Elkind 1977; Cohen 1968; Durkin 1966; Clark 1976; Howell and Sylvester 1983; Lengyel 1980; Morrow 1983; Strickland 1972). Although these studies do not clearly establish a causal relationship, the high incidence of a positive correlation within this body of research strongly indicates that experiences with oral literature are beneficial to academic achievement in reading.

Listening to children's books also has positive effects on oral language development, both expressive and receptive. Vocabulary growth, acquisition of morphemes, ability to reproduce standard English structures, understanding of the complex syntax of the written word, concept development, and a sense of story are values attributed to interaction with literature (Burgess 1982; Chomsky 1972; Cullinan, Jagger, and Strickland 1974; Hooper and Hare 1982; Long and Scott 1976; Strickland 1972). Chomsky (1972) found that the language of books exposes children to a higher level of syntactic complexity than other oral language activities and, therefore, enhances receptive language development by increasing the ability to comprehend complex syntax. Loban (1976), in an extensive longitudinal study, documented a six year range of individual differences in children's speaking abilities and reported that children with a high level of proficiency in oral language also excelled in other areas of language arts, especially written composition skills.

The quality of literature, parental style of reading, verbal interaction during and after the story, and opportunities for follow-up activities affect the values derived from read-aloud sessions. Children seem to benefit more when the story is extended through conversation and oral language activities (Cullinan, Jagger, and Strickland 1974; Chomsky

1972; Flood 1977; Heath 1982; Strickland 1972).

Researchers and educators are not the only ones who recognize the values of reading aloud to children. The phenomenal success of The Read Aloud Handbook (Trelease 1982) reflects parental interest in children's experiences with literature. Parents who read to their children see development of imagination and creativity, increased understanding of self and others, pure enjoyment, and other affective values as well as cognitive growth.

While everyone seems to agree that reading aloud to children is of value, societal changes in the family unit have reduced the time that some parents have to interact with their children. Only 12 percent of women with children under six were in the work force in 1950 while the 1980 census figures revealed that 45 percent of such women were employed as were 62 percent of mothers with school age children (U.S. Department of Commerce 1983). A recent article in Newsweek reported that in 1984 single parents headed one-fourth of U.S. families with children under eighteen. The same article predicted that this will be true for one-third to one-half of families by 1990 (Newsweek 1985).

Societal changes are apparent in the rapid growth of child-care facilities such as Kinder-Care, Incorporated, which began with one learning center in 1969, grew to eighty-eight locations by 1975, and opened its one thousandth center in the fall of 1985. Corporate child care is also increasing rapidly to meet the needs of children whose mothers are employed. Many children spend the majority of their waking hours in child-care centers. Working parents, concerned that limited time with their children be quality time, seek to determine what activities will be of greatest value. This increased time pressure makes it more difficult to

choose between possible alternatives and certainly to schedule read-aloud sessions.

### The Study

The purpose of this study was to determine parental practices of reading aloud to pre-school children enrolled in child-care settings. A nationwide survey was conducted in the spring of 1985 using, as a target population, families whose children were enrolled in Kinder-Care Learning Centers.

Fifty Kinder-Care Learning Centers were selected by stratified random sampling so that geographic distribution by four United States regions was representative of the nine hundred centers from which the sample was drawn. These randomly selected centers were located in twenty-five states, with the number of centers per state ranging from one to five. Parents of three, four, and five year old children in these centers comprised the sample population.

Survey forms designed to collect demographic data and information regarding practices of reading aloud to children were distributed to the sample population. Questions focused on demographic data, frequency and length of read-aloud sessions, sources of books, the person who usually reads to the child, verbal interaction during read-aloud sessions, favorite books, read-aloud time and read-aloud place, and whether or not the child was familiar with selected well-known characters from children's literature. Forms were brief, requiring no more than five minutes to complete. Individual responses were anonymous and confidential. Data was computerized and analyzed by the researchers.

## Results

Survey forms were returned by 80 percent of the centers, representing twenty-two states in all four geographic regions. A total of 444 forms were tabulated and analyzed. Based on enrollment figures provided by Kinder-Care headquarters, 28.6 percent ( $N = 1651$ ) of the parents in the forty participating centers returned forms.

The 444 children in the sample were fairly evenly distributed by age, with 28.4 percent three year olds, 39.4 percent four year olds, and 32.2 percent five year olds. Male (52.3 percent) and female (47.7 percent) distribution was also typical, and almost half of the sample (42.6 percent) were children with no siblings. Parent education levels and family income figures indicated that the sample was primarily middle to upper middle class. Educational levels for mothers and fathers were comparable, and 394 of the 444 children were from homes where all adults were employed.

A significant finding was the number of hours that children spent in the child care setting. Of the 404 responses to this question, 70.5 percent indicated that the child stayed forty or more hours at the center, ranging from 65.2 percent of three year olds to 73.6 percent of five year olds being full time clients. The extensive time spent in the center means less time with parents for any type of interaction including reading.

In spite of the limited time that these working parents had to spend with their children, 83.4 percent ( $N = 442$ ) reported that they read aloud several times a week or more, and 89 percent ( $N = 438$ ) spent at least fifteen minutes per read-aloud session. Mothers were more apt to read to the children, 64.9 percent ( $N = 442$ ), but 33.3 checked either "father" or more than one response, which indicated that daddies were reading, too. Almost all respondents, 99.6 percent ( $N = 439$ ), reported occasional or

frequent verbal interaction during read-aloud sessions. The favorite read-aloud time was bedtime, with 67.1 percent (N = 444) reporting this choice, and 56.3 percent listing bed or bedroom as the preferred read-aloud place.

Significant information was obtained regarding the variety and quality of literature being shared with children. When asked to select the primary source of children's reading material, 83 percent (N = 440) indicated read-aloud selections were books available in the home. When listing the child's three favorite books, a large majority of parents listed either "grocery store" books such as Care Bears, Star Wars, or Smurfs, or familiar folk or fairy tales. Parents were also asked to check a list of well known characters from children's literature, marking all those with which their children were familiar. The number of children who knew these characters was surprisingly low. Percentages of children familiar with the various characters ranged from a low of 5 percent to a high of 64.6 percent, with the great majority of the characters being familiar to less than 20 percent of the children.

Since the study purposely focused on working parents, results can not be generalized to the population as a whole. Families in the sample were primarily middle class or upper middle class. These individuals are likely to have information regarding positive parental reading practices and are apt to be supportive of their children's educational development.

The 28.6 percent return rate is a limitation of the study and certainly makes it impossible to state that results are representative of the sample population. However, it seems logical to hypothesize that data would be skewed in a positive direction, with parents who are reading to their children being more likely to return forms than those who are not. The low return rate is also indicative of the time pressures on working parents, and one can only wonder if those too busy to complete a five minute survey are

finding time to read to their children. Analysis of the data from the 444 returned forms, however, does provide some valuable information that has implications for both parents and child care professionals.

#### Implications and Recommendations

Many children are spending a full day in child care centers while working parents are contending with time pressures and limited opportunities to interact with their children. In spite of these facts, some parents are finding time in their busy schedules to read to their children. However, the 28.6 percent return rate for this survey indicates that a larger group of parents who did not respond may or may not see the values of reading aloud to preschoolers.

Since many children spend more daytime hours in preschool settings than with their parents, child care workers must share the responsibility for introducing young children to the joy available in good books. Staff members need to know quality literature and to make books readily accessible to children and parents. Center programs must include effective techniques both for sharing stories with children and for providing a variety of activities that encourage youngsters to respond creatively to books. It is important that experiences with literature not be sacrificed as pressures are put on centers to attain academic readiness for preschoolers. Listening to stories and participating in literature-related activities will foster readiness in ways that are consistent with child development and the philosophy of quality preschool programs.

Child care professionals can also be instrumental in helping parents become familiar with good children's books. The results of the survey indicate that although parents are willing to take time to share literature

with children, they might benefit from parent education programs regarding literature. Center personnel are in an ideal position to help parents understand the values of reading aloud, and to make suggestions regarding good books to share. Greater use of the library as a source for books should also be encouraged. Many parents may need to schedule alternate or additional read-aloud times and places since bedtime may find both adults and children too tired to reap maximum benefits, though there certainly is a closeness and warmth associated with the traditional bedtime story. Parent education programs could also offer suggestions for effective verbal interaction during read-aloud sessions and for creative response activities in art, drama, cooking, and oral language.

Center personnel must communicate frequently and clearly with parents since they may spend more time with a child than the parents do. Betty Caldwell (1979) quoted from A Tale of Two Cities at the 1979 conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "These are the best of times and the worst of times" for those who work with young children - best because of the opportunities for positive influence, yet worst due to the tremendous pressures placed upon them to support children and families in so many ways. Experiences with good books are essential to this support system so all children will enjoy a rich heritage of literature that will last a lifetime.

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